The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about willow trees

Putonghua pronunciation: yī
Cantonese pronunciation: yi1
Meanings: lean on, rely on endearing

依 shows 依 (人 ren2), 衣 (yi1, clothes) side-by-side: 依靠 (yi1 kao4 = lean~rely), 依赖 (yi1 lai4 = lean~depend), 依据 (yi1 jü4 = depending~evidence), 依纍 (yi1 lian4 = lean-on~love = loving endearingly), 依舊 (yi1 jiu4 = reyling~on~old = still/unchanged).

Willow-trees signify gentleness/endearment. 楊柳依依 (yang2 liu3 yi1 yi1 = Yang-willow~leaning~leaning) = hanging branches of weeping willow clinging on to departing traveler. 依依不捨 (yi1 yi1 bu4 she3 = leaning~leaning~no~forsake) = reluctantly watching friend/lover depart. 小鳥依人 (xiao3 niao3 yi1 ren2 = little~bird~leaning~on~person) describes girl’s sweet hug.

After hopelessly groping, traveler/struggler sees 柳暗花明又一村 (liu3 an4 hua1 ming2 you4 yi1 cun1 = willows~shaded/hidden-flowers~bright/exposed~again~a~village = dramatic turn of events leading to good prospects ahead).

by Diana Yue